LIVES OF INFAMOUS MEN*

This is not a book of history. The selection found here was guided by nothing more substantial than my taste, my pleasure, an emotion, laughter, surprise, a certain dread, or some other feeling whose intensity I might have trouble justifying, now that the first moment of discovery has passed.

It's an anthology of existences. Lives of a few lines or a few pages, nameless misfortunes and adventures gathered into a handful of words. Brief lives, encountered by chance in books and documents. *Exempla*, but unlike those collected by the sages in the course of their reading, they are examples that convey not so much lessons to ponder as brief effects whose force fades almost at once. The term "news" would fit them rather well, I think, because of the double reference it suggests: to the rapid pace of the narrative and to the reality of the events that are related. For the things said in these texts are so compressed that one isn't sure whether the intensity that sparks through them is due more to the vividness of the words or to the jostling violence of the facts they tell. Singular lives, transformed into strange poems through who knows what twists of fate—that is what I decided to gather into a kind of herbarium.

As I recall, the idea came to me one day when I was reading, at the Bibliothèque Nationale, a record of internment written at the very beginning of the eighteenth century. If I'm not mistaken, it occurred to me as I read these two notices:

Mathurin Milan, placed in the hospital of Charenton, 31 August 1707: "His madness was always to hide from his family, to lead an obscure life in the country, to have actions at law, to lend usuriously and without security, to lead his feeble mind down unknown paths, and to believe himself capable of the greatest employments."

Jean Antoine Touzard, placed in the castle of Bicêtre, 21 April 1701: "Seditious apostate friar, capable of the greatest crimes, sodomite, atheist if that were possible; this individual is a veritable monster of abomination whom it would be better to stifle than to leave at large."

It would be hard to say exactly what I felt when I read these fragments and many others that were similar. No doubt, one of these impressions that are called "physical," as if there could be any other kind. I admit that these "short stories," suddenly emerging from two and a half centuries of silence, stirred more fibers within me than what is ordinarily called "literature," without my being able to say even now if I was more moved by the beauty of that Classical style, draped in a few sentences around characters that were plainly wretched, or by the excesses, the blend of dark stubbornness and rascality, of these lives whose disarray and relentless energy one senses beneath the stone-smooth words.

A long time ago I made use of documents like these for a book. If I did so back then, it was doubtless because of the resonance I still experience today when I happen to encounter these lowly lives reduced to ashes in the few sentences that struck them down. The dream would have been to restore their intensity in an analysis. Lacking the necessary talent, I brooded over the analysis alone. I considered the texts in their dryness, trying to determine their reason for being, what institutions or what political practice they referred to, seeking to understand why it had suddenly been so important in a society like ours to "stifle" (as one stifles a cry, smothers a fire, or strangles an animal) a scandalous monk or a peculiar and inconsequential usurer. I looked for the reason why people were so zealous to prevent the feebleminded from walking down unknown paths. But the first intensities that had motivated me remained excluded. And since there was a good chance that they wouldn't enter into the order of reasons at all, seeing that my discourse was incapable of conveying them in the necessary way, wouldn't it be better to leave them in the very form that had caused me to first feel them?

Whence the idea of this collection, done more or less as the occasion arose. A collection compiled without haste and without a clear purpose. For a long time I thought of presenting it in a systematic order, with a few rudiments of explanation, and in such a way that it would exhibit a minimum of historical significance. I decided against this, for reasons that I will come back to later. I resolved simply to assemble a certain number of texts, for the intensity they seem to me to have. I have appended a few preliminary remarks to them, and I have distributed them so as to preserve, as best I could, the effect of each.

So this book will not answer the purpose of historians, even less than it will others'. A mood-based and purely subjective book? I would say rather—but it may come to the same thing—that it's a rule- and game-based book, the book of a little obsession that found its system. I think that the poem of the oddball usurer or that of the sodomite monk served as a model throughout. It was in order to recapture something like those flash existences, those poem-lives, that I laid down a certain number of simple rules for myself:

- The persons included must have actually existed.
- These existences must have been both obscure and ill-fated.
- They must have been recounted in a few pages or, better, a few sentences, as brief as possible.
- These tales must not just constitute strange or pathetic anecdotes; but, in one way or another (because they were complaints, denunciations, orders, or reports), they must have truly formed part of the minuscule history of these existences, of their misfortune, their wildness, or their dubious madness.
- And for us still, the shock of these words must give rise to a certain effect of beauty mixed with dread.

But I should say a little more about these rules that may appear arbitrary.

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I wanted it always to be a matter of real existences: that one might be able to give them a place and a date; that behind these names that no longer say anything, behind these quick words which may well have been false, mendacious, unjust, exaggerated, there were men who lived and died, with sufferings, meannesses, jealousies, vociferations. So I excluded everything in the way of imagination or literature: none of the dark heroes that the latter have invented appeared as intense to me as these cobblers, these army deserters, these garment-sellers, these scriveners, these vagabond monks, all of them rabid, scandalous, or pitiful. And this was owing, no doubt, to the mere fact that they are known to have lived. I likewise ruled out all the texts that might be memoirs, recollections, tableaus, all those recounting a slice of reality but keeping the distance of observation, of memory, of curiosity, or of amusement. I was determined that these texts always be in a relation or, rather, in the greatest possible number of relations with reality: not only that they refer to it, but they be operative within it; that they form part of the dramaturgy of the real; that they constitute the instrument of a retaliation, the weapon of a hatred, an episode in a battle, the gesticulation of a despair or a jealousy, an entreaty or an order. I didn't try to bring together texts that would be more faithful to reality than others, that would merit inclusion for their representative value, but, rather, texts that played a part in the reality they speak of—and that, in return, whatever their inaccuracy, their exaggeration, or their hypocrisy, are traversed by it: fragments of discourse trailing the fragments of a reality they are part of. One won't see a collection of verbal portraits here, but traps, weapons, cries, gestures, attitudes, ruses, intrigues for which words were the instruments. Real lives were "enacted" [*"jouées"*] in these few sentences: by this I don't mean that they were represented but that their liberty, their misfortune, often their death, in any case their fate, were actually decided therein, at least in part. These discourses really crossed lives; existences were actually risked and lost in these words.

Another requirement of mine was that these personages themselves be obscure; that nothing would have prepared them for any notoriety; that they would not have been endowed with any of the established and recognized nobilities—those of birth, fortune, saintliness, heroism, or genius; that they would have belonged to those

billions of existences destined to pass away without a trace; that in their misfortunes, their passions, in those loves and hatreds there would be something gray and ordinary in comparison with what is usually deemed worthy of being recounted; that, nevertheless, they be propelled by a violence, an energy, an excess expressed in the malice, vileness, baseness, obstinacy, or ill-fortune this gave them in the eyes of their fellows—and in proportion to its very mediocrity, a sort of appalling or pitiful grandeur. I had gone in search of these sorts of particles endowed with an energy all the greater for their being small and difficult to discern.

But in order for some part of them to reach us, a beam of light had to illuminate them, for a moment at least. A light coming from elsewhere. What snatched them from the darkness in which they could, perhaps should, have remained was the encounter with power; without that collision, it's very unlikely that any word would be there to recall their fleeting trajectory. The power that watched these lives, that pursued them, that lent its attention, if only for a moment, to their complaints and their little racket, and marked them with its claw was what gave rise to the few words about them that remain for us—either because someone decided to appeal to it in order to denounce, complain, solicit, entreat, or because he chose to intervene and in a few words to judge and decide. All those lives destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear without ever having been told were able to leave traces—brief, incisive, often enigmatic—only at the point of their instantaneous contact with power. So that it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp them again in themselves, as they might have been "in a free state"; they can no longer be separated out from the declamations, the tactical biases, the obligatory lies that power games and power relations presuppose.

I will be told: "That's so like you, always with the same inability to cross the line, to pass to the other side, to listen and convey the language that comes from elsewhere or from below; always the same choice, on the side of power, of what it says or causes to be said. Why not go listen to these lives where they speak in their own voice?" But, first of all, would anything at all remain of what they were in their violence or in their singular misfortune had they not, at a given moment, met up with power and provoked its forces? Is it not one of the fundamental traits of our society, after all, that

destiny takes the form of a relation with power, of a struggle with or against it? Indeed, the most intense point of a life, the point where its energy is concentrated, is where it comes up against power, struggles with it, attempts to use its forces and to evade its traps. The brief and strident words that went back and forth between power and the most inessential existences doubtless constitute, for the latter, the only monument they have ever been granted: it is what gives them, for the passage through time, the bit of brilliance, the brief flash that carries them to us.

In short, I wanted to assemble a few rudiments for a legend of obscure men, out of the discourses that, in sorrow or in rage, they exchanged with power.

A "legend" because, as in all legends, there is a certain ambiguity between the fictional and the real—but it occurs for opposite reasons. Whatever its kernel of reality, the legendary is nothing else, finally, but the sum of what is said about it. It is indifferent to the existence or nonexistence of the persons whose glory it transmits. If they existed, the legend covers them with so many wonders, embellishing them with so many impossibilities, that it's almost as if they had never lived. And if they are purely imaginary, the legend reports so many insistent tales about them that they take on the historical thickness of someone who existed. In the texts that follow, the existence of these men and women comes down to exactly what was said about them: nothing subsists of what they were or what they did, other than what is found in a few sentences. Here it is rarity and not prolixity that makes reality equivalent to fiction. Having been nothing in history, having played no appreciable role in events or among important people, having left no identifiable trace around them, they don't have and never will have any existence outside the precarious domicile of these words. And through those texts which tell about them, they come down to us bearing no more of the markings of reality than if they had come from *La Légende dorée* or from an adventure novel.[1] This purely verbal existence, which makes these forlorn or villainous individuals into quasi-fictional beings, is due to their nearly complete disappearance, and to that luck or mischance which resulted in the survival, through the peradventure of rediscovered documents, of a scarce few words that speak of them or that are pronounced by them. A dark but, above all, a dry legend,

reduced to what was said one day and preserved down to our day by improbable encounters.

That is another trait of this dark legend. It has not been transmitted like one that was gilded by some deep necessity, following continuous paths. By nature, it is bereft of any tradition; discontinuities, effacement, oblivion, convergences, reappearances: this is the only way it can reach us. Chance carries it from the beginning. It first required a combination of circumstances that, contrary to all expectations, focused the attention of power and the outburst of its anger on the most obscure individual, on his mediocre life, on his (after all, rather ordinary) faults: a stroke of misfortune that caused the vigilance of officials or of institutions, aimed no doubt at suppressing all disorder, to pick on this person rather than that, this scandalous monk, this beaten woman, this inveterate and furious drunkard, this quarrelsome merchant, and not so many others who were making just as much of a ruckus. And then it had to be just this document, among so many others scattered and lost, which came down to us and be rediscovered and read. So that between these people of no importance and us who have no more importance than they, there is no necessary connection. Nothing made it likely for them to emerge from the shadows, they instead of others, with their lives and their sorrows. We may amuse ourselves, if we wish, by seeing a revenge in this: the chance that enabled these absolutely undistinguished people to emerge from their place amid the dead multitudes, to gesticulate again, to manifest their rage, their affliction, or their invincible determination to err—perhaps it makes up for the bad luck that brought power's lightning bolt down upon them, in spite of their modesty and anonymity.

Lives that are as though they hadn't been, that survive only from the clash with a power that wished only to annihilate them or at least to obliterate them, lives that come back to us only through the effect of multiple accidents—these are the infamies that I wanted to assemble here in the form of a few remains. There exists a false infamy, the kind with which those men of terror or scandal, Gilles de Rais, Guillery or Cartouche, Sade and Lacenaire,[2] are blessed. Apparently infamous, because of the abominable memories they have left, the misdeeds attributed to them, the respectful horror they have inspired, they are actually men of glorious legend, even if the reasons for that renown are the opposite of those that con-

stitute or ought to constitute the greatness of men. Their infamy is only a modality of the universal *fama*. But the apostate friar, the feeble minds lost on unknown paths, those are infamous in the strict sense: they no longer exist except through the terrible words that were destined to render them forever unworthy of the memory of men. And chance determined that these words, these words alone, would subsist. The return of these lives to reality occurs in the very form in which they were driven out of the world. Useless to look for another face for them, or to suspect a different greatness in them; they are no longer anything but that which was meant to crush them—neither more nor less. Such is infamy in the strict sense, the infamy that, being unmixed with ambiguous scandal or unspoken admiration, has nothing to do with any sort of glory.

In comparison with infamy's great collection, which would gather its traces from everywhere and all times, I'm well aware that the selection here is paltry, narrow, a bit monotonous. It comprises documents that all date approximately from the same hundred years, 1660–1760, and come from the same source: archives of confinement, of the police, of petitions to the King, and of *lettres de cachet*. Let us suppose that this may be a first volume and that *Lives of Infamous Men* will be extended to other times and other places.

I chose this period and this type of texts because of an old familiarity. But if the taste I've had for them for years has not diminished, and if I come back to them now, it's because I suspect they manifest a beginning, or at any rate an important event, in which political mechanisms and discursive effects intersected.

These texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (especially when compared with the flatness of later administrative and police documents) display a brilliance, reveal a splendor of phrasing, a vehemence that belies, in our judgment at least, the pettiness of the affair or the rather shameful meanness of intent. The most pitiful lives are described with the imprecations or emphasis that would seem to suit the most tragic. A comical effect, no doubt: there is something ludicrous in summoning all the power of words, and through them the supreme power of heaven and earth, around insignificant disorders or such ordinary woes. "Unable to bear the weight of the most excessive sorrow, the clerk Duschene ventures, with a humble and respectful confidence, to throw himself at the feet of Your Majesty to implore his justice against the cruelest of all women. . . . What hope must not rise in the breast of this unfortunate one who, reduced to the last extremity, today appeals to Your Majesty after having exhausted all the ways of gentleness, remonstrance, and consideration to bring back to her duty a wife who lacks all sentiment of religion, honor, probity, and even humanity? Such is, Sire, the state of this poor wretch who dares to voice his plaintive appeal to the ears of Your Majesty." Or that abandoned wetnurse who asks for the arrest of her husband on behalf of her four children "who may have nothing to expect from their father but a terrible example of the effects of disorder. Your justice, my Lord, will surely spare them such a degrading lesson, will prevent opprobrium and infamy for me and my family, by rendering incapable of doing any injury to society a bad citizen who will not fail to bring it harm." We may laugh at this, but it should be kept in mind that to this rhetoric, grandiloquent only because of the smallness of the things to which it is applied, power responds in terms that appear no less excessive—with the difference that its words convey the fulguration of its decisions—and their solemnity may be warranted, if not by the importance of what they punish, then by the harshness of the penalty they impose. If some caster of horoscopes is locked up, this is because "there are few crimes she has not committed, and none of which she is not capable. So there is as much charity as justice in immediately ridding the public of so dangerous a woman, who has robbed it, duped it, and scandalized it with impunity for so many years." And about a young addlebrain, a bad son and a ne'er-do-well: "He is a monster of libertinage and impiety. . . . Practices all the vices: knavish, disobedient, impetuous, violent, capable of deliberate attacks on the life of his own father . . . always in the company of the worst prostitutes. Nothing that is said about his knaveries and profligacies makes any impression on his heart; he responds only with a scoundrel's smile that communicates his callousness and gives no reason to think he is anything short of incurable." With the least peccadillo, one is always in the abominable, or at least in the discourse of invective and execration. These loose women and these unruly children do not pale next to Nero or Rodogune. The discourse of power in the Classical age, like the discourses addressed to it, produces monsters. Why this emphatic theater of the quotidian?

Christianity had in large part organized power's hold on the ordinary preoccupations of life: an obligation to run the minuscule everyday world regularly through the mill of language, revealing the common faults, the imperceptible failings even, and down to the murky interplay of thoughts, intentions, and desires; a ritual of confession in which the one speaking is at the same the one spoken about; an effacement of the thing said by its very utterance, but also with an augmentation of the confession itself, which must remain secret, and not leave any other trace behind it but repentance and acts of contrition. The Christian West invented that astonishing constraint, which it imposed on everyone, to tell everything in order to efface everything, to express even the most minor faults in an unbroken, relentless, exhaustive murmur which nothing must elude, but which must not outlive itself even for a moment. For hundreds of millions of men and over a period of centuries, evil had to be confessed in the first person, in an obligatory and ephemeral whisper.

But, from the end of the seventeenth century, this mechanism was encircled and outreached by another one whose operation was very different. An administrative and no longer a religious apparatus; a recording mechanism instead of a pardoning mechanism. The objective was the same, however, at least in part: to bring the quotidian into discourse, to survey the tiny universe of irregularities and unimportant disorders. In this system, though, confession does not play the eminent role that Christianity had reserved for it. For this social mapping and control, long-standing procedures are used, but ones that had been localized up to then: the denunciation, the complaint, the inquiry, the report, spying, the interrogation. And everything that is said in this way is noted down in writing, is accumulated, is gathered into dossiers and archives. The single, instantaneous, and traceless voice of the penitential confession that effaced evil as it effaced itself would now be supplanted by multiple voices, which were to be deposited in an enormous documentary mass and thus constitute, through time, a sort of constantly growing record of all the world's woes. The minuscule trouble of misery and transgression is no longer sent to heaven through the scarcely audible confidence of the confession: it accumulates on earth in the form of written traces. An entirely different type of relations is established between power, discourse, and the quotidian, an altogether different way of governing the latter and of formulating it. For ordinary life, a new mise-en-scène is born.

We are familiar with its first instruments, archaic but already complex: they are the petitions, the *lettres de cachet* or king's orders, the various internments, the police reports and decisions. I won't go back over these things, which are already well known; I'll just recall certain aspects that may account for the strange intensity, and for a kind of beauty that sometimes emanates from these hastily drawn images in which unfortunate men assume, for us who perceive them from such a great distance, the guise of infamy. The *lettre de cachet*, internment, the generalized presence of the police—all that usually evokes only the despotism of an absolute monarchy. But one cannot help but see that this "arbitrariness" was a kind of public service. Except in the rarest of cases, the "king's orders" did not strike without warning, crashing down from above as signs of the monarch's anger. More often than not, they were requested against someone by his entourage—his father and mother, one of his relatives, his family, his sons or daughters, his neighbors, the local priest on occasion, or some notable. They were solicited for some obscure family trouble, as if it involved a great crime meriting the sovereign's wrath: rejected or abused spouses, a squandered fortune, conflicts of interest, disobedient young people, knavery or carousing, and all the little disorders of conduct. The *lettre de cachet* that was presented as the express and particular will of the king to have one of his subjects confined, outside the channels of regular justice, was nothing more than the response to such petitions coming from below. But it was not freely granted to anyone requesting it: an inquiry must precede it, for the purpose of substantiating the claims made in the petition. It needed to establish whether the debauchery or drunken spree, the violence or the libertinage, called for an internment, and under what conditions and for how long—a job for the police, who would collect statements by witnesses, information from spies, and all the haze of doubtful rumor that forms around each individual.

The system of *lettre de cachet* and internment was only a rather brief episode, lasting for little more than a century and limited to France. But it is nonetheless important in the history of power mechanisms. It did not bring about the uninvited intrusion of royal arbitrariness in the most everyday dimension of life. It ensured,

rather, the distribution of that power through complex circuits and a whole interplay of petitions and responses. An absolutist abuse? Maybe so, yet not in the sense that the absolute monarch purely and simply abused his own power; rather, in the sense that each individual could avail himself, for his own ends and against others, of absolute power in its enormity—a sort of placing of the mechanisms of sovereignty at one's disposal, an opportunity to divert its effects to one's own benefit, for anyone clever enough to capture them. A certain number of consequences followed from this: political sovereignty penetrated into the most elementary dimension of the social body; the resources of an absolutist political power, beyond the traditional weapons of authority and submission, could be brought into play between subject and subject, sometimes the most humble of them, between family members and between neighbors, and in relations of interests, of profession, of rivalry, of love and hate. Providing one knew how to play the game, every individual could become for the other a terrible and lawless monarch: *homo homini rex*. A whole political network became interwoven with the fabric of everyday life. But it was still necessary, at least for a moment, to appropriate this power, channel it, capture it, and bend it in the direction one wanted; if one meant to take advantage of it, it was necessary to "seduce" it. It became both an object of covetousness and an object of seduction; it was desirable, then, precisely insofar as it was dreadful. The intervention of a limitless political power in everyday relations thus became not only acceptable and familiar but deeply condoned—not without becoming, from that very fact, the theme of a generalized fear. We should not be surprised at this inclination which, little by little, opened up the relations of appurtenance or dependence that traditionally connect the family to administrative and political controls. Nor should we be surprised that the king's boundless power, thus operating in the midst of passions, rages, miseries, and mischiefs, was able to become—despite or perhaps even because of its utility—an object of execration. Those who resorted to the *lettres de cachet* and the king who granted them were caught in the trap of their complicity: the first lost more and more of their traditional prerogatives to an administrative authority. As for the king, he became detestable from having meddled on a daily basis in so many hatreds and intrigues. As I recall, it was the Duke de Chaulieu who said, in the *Mémoires*

de deux jeunes mariées, that by cutting off the king's head, the French Revolution decapitated all family men.[5]

For the moment, I would like to single out one element from all the foregoing: with this apparatus comprising petitions, *lettres de cachets*, internment, and police, there would issue an endless number of discourses that would pervade daily life and take charge of the minuscule ills of insignificant lives, but in a completely different manner from the confession. Neighborhood disputes, the quarrels of parents and children, misunderstandings between couples, the excesses of wine and sex, public altercations, and many secret passions would all be caught in the nets of power which stretched through rather complex circuits. There was a kind of immense and omnipresent call for the processing of these disturbances and these petty sufferings into discourse. An unending hum began to be heard, the sound of the discourse that delivered individual variations of behavior, shames, and secrets into the grip of power. The commonplace ceased to belong to silence, to the passing rumor or the fleeting confession. All those ingredients of the ordinary, the unimportant detail, obscurity, unexceptional days, community life, could and must be told—better still, written down. They became describable and transcribable, precisely insofar as they were traversed by the mechanisms of a political power. For a long time, only the actions of great men had merited being told without mockery: only blood, birth, and exploit gave a right to history. And if it sometimes happened that the lowliest men acceded to a kind of glory, this was by virtue of some extraordinary fact—the distinction of a saintliness or the enormity of a crime. There was never a thought that there might be, in the everyday run of things, something like a secret to raise, that the inessential might be, in a certain way, important, until the blank gaze of power came to rest on these minuscule commotions.

The birth, consequently, of an immense possibility for discourse. A certain knowledge of the quotidian had a part at least in its origin, together with a grid of intelligibility that the West undertook to extend over our actions, our ways of being and of behaving. But the birth in question depended also on the real and virtual omnipresence of the monarch; one had to imagine him sufficiently near to all those miseries, sufficiently attentive to the least of those disorders, before one could attempt to invoke him: he had to seem en-

dowed with a kind of physical ubiquity himself. In its first form, this discourse concerning the quotidian was turned entirely toward the king; it was addressed to him; it had to slip into the great ceremonious rituals of power; it had to adopt their form and take on their signs. The commonplace could be told, described, observed, categorized, and indexed only within a power relation that was haunted by the figure of the king—by his real power or by the specter of his might. Hence the peculiar form of that discourse: it required a decorative, imprecatory, or supplicating language. All those little everyday squabbles had to be told with the emphasis of rare events worthy of royal attention; these inconsequential affairs had to be dressed up in grand rhetoric. In subsequent periods, neither the dreary reports of police administration nor the case histories of medicine or psychiatry would ever recapture such effects of language. At times, a sumptuous verbal edifice for relating an obscure piece of meanness or a minor intrigue; at others, a few brief sentences that strike down a poor wretch and plunge him back into his darkness; or the long tale of sorrows recounted in the form of supplication and humility. The political discourse of banality could not be anything but solemn.

But these texts also manifested another effect of incongruity. It often happened that the petitions for internment were lodged by illiterate or semiliterate persons of humble circumstance; they themselves, with their meager skills, or an underqualified scribe in their place, would compose as best they could the formulas or turns of phrase they believed to be required when one addressed the king or high officials, and they would stir in words that were awkward and violent, loutish expressions by which they hoped no doubt to give their petitions more force and truthfulness. In this way, crude, clumsy, and jarring expressions would suddenly appear in the midst of solemn and disjointed sentences, alongside nonsensical words; the obligatory and ritualistic language would be interspersed with outbursts of impatience, anger, rage, passion, rancor, and rebellion. The rules of this stilted discourse were thus upset by a vibration, by wild intensities muscling in with their own ways of saying things. This is how the wife of Nicolas Bienfait speaks: she "takes the liberty of representing very humbly to your Lordship that said Nicolas Bienfait, coachman, is a highly debauched man who is killing her with blows, and who is selling everything having already

caused the deaths of his two wives, the first of whom he killed her child in the body, the second of whom after having sold and eaten what was hers, by his bad treatment caused her to die from languishment, even trying to strangle her on the eve of her death. . . . The third, he wishes to eat her heart on the grill, not to mention many other murders he did. My Lord, I throw myself at the feet of Your Highness to beseech Your Mercy. I hope that from your goodness you will render me justice, because my life being risked at every moment, I shall not cease praying to God for the preservation of your health. . . ."

The texts that I've brought together here are homogeneous, and they may well appear monotonous. Yet they function in the element of disparity. A disparity between the things recounted and the manner of telling them; a disparity between those who complain and those who have every power over them; a disparity between the minuscule order of the problems raised and the enormity of the power brought into play; a disparity between the language of ceremony and power and that of rage or helplessness. These are texts that nod in the direction of Racine, or Bossuet, or Crébillon; but they convey a whole stock of popular turbulence, of misery, and violence, of "baseness" as it was called, that no literature in that period could have accommodated. They bring tramps, poor wretches, or simply mediocre individuals onto a strange stage where they strike poses, speechify, and declaim, where they drape themselves in the bits of cloth they need if they wish to draw attention in the theater of power. At times they remind one of a poor troupe of jugglers and clowns who deck themselves out in makeshift scraps of old finery to play before an audience of aristocrats who will make fun of them. Except that they are staking their whole life on the performance: they are playing before powerful men who can decide their fate. Characters out of Céline, trying to make themselves heard at Versailles.

One day, all this incongruity would be swept away. Power exercised at the level of everyday life would no longer be that of a near and distant, omnipotent, and capricious monarch, the source of all justice and an object of every sort of enticement, both a political principle and a magical authority; it would be made up of a fine, differentiated, continuous network, in which the various institutions of the judiciary, the police, medicine, and psychiatry would

operate hand in hand. And the discourse that would then take form would no longer have that old artificial and clumsy theatricality: it would develop in a language that would claim to be that of observation and neutrality. The commonplace would be analyzed through the efficient but colorless categories of administration, journalism, and science—unless one goes a little further to seek out its splendors in the domain of literature. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we are still in the rough and barbarous age when all these mediations don't exist: the body of the *misérables* is brought into almost direct contact with that of the king, their agitation with his ceremonies. There, not even a shared language but, rather, a clash between the cries and the rituals, between the disorders to be told and the rigor of the forms that must be followed. Whence, for us who look from afar at that first upsurge of the everyday into the code of the political, the strange fulgurations that appear, something gaudy and intense that will later be lost, when these things and these men will be made into "matters," into incidents or cases.

An important moment, this one, when a society lent words, turns of phrase, and sentences, language rituals to the anonymous mass of people so that they might speak of themselves—speak publicly and on the triple condition that their discourse be uttered and put in circulation within a well-defined apparatus of power; that it reveal the hitherto barely perceptible lower depths of social existence, and through the access provided by that diminutive war of passions and interests, it offer power the possibility of a sovereign intervention. Dionysius' ear was a small, rudimentary machine by comparison. How light power would be, and easy to dismantle no doubt, if all it did was to observe, spy, detect, prohibit, and punish; but it incites, provokes, produces. It is not simply eye and ear: it makes people act and speak.

This machinery was doubtless important for the constitution of new knowledges [*savoirs*]. It was not unconnected, moreover, with a whole new regime of literature. I don't mean to say that the *lettre de cachet* was at the point of origin of new literary forms; rather, that at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries relations of discourse, power, everyday life, and truth were knotted together in a new way, one in which literature was also entangled.

The fable, in the proper sense of the word, is that which deserves to be told. For a long time in Western society, everyday life could accede to discourse only if it was traversed and transfigured by the legendary: it had to be drawn out of itself by heroism, the exploit, adventures, Providence and grace, or occasionally the heinous crime. It needed to be marked with a touch of impossibility—only then did it become expressible. What made it inaccessible enabled it to function as lesson and example. The more extraordinary the tale, the more capable it was of casting a spell or of persuading. In this game of the "exemplary fabulous," indifference to truth and untruth was therefore fundamental. If someone happened to describe the shabby side of reality, this was mainly to produce a comical effect: the mere fact of talking about it made people laugh.

Starting in the seventeenth century, the West saw the emergence of a whole "fable" of obscure life, from which the fabulous was banished. The impossible or the ridiculous ceased to be the condition under which the ordinary could be recounted. An art of language was born whose task was no longer to tell of the improbable but to bring into view that which doesn't, which can't and mustn't, appear—to tell the last and most tenuous degrees of the real. Just as an apparatus was being installed for forcing people to tell the "insignificant" [*"l'infime"*]—that which isn't told, which doesn't merit any glory, therefore, the "infamous"—a new imperative was forming that would constitute what could be called the "immanent ethic" of Western literary discourse. Its ceremonial functions would gradually fade; it would no longer have the task of manifesting in a tangible way the all too visible radiance of force, grace, heroism, and might but, rather, of searching for the things hardest to perceive—the most hidden, hardest to tell and to show, and lastly most forbidden and scandalous. A kind of injunction to ferret out the most nocturnal and most quotidian elements of existence (even if this sometimes meant discovering the solemn figures of fate) would mark out the course that literature would follow from the seventeenth century onward, from the time it began to be literature in the modern sense of the word. More than a specific form, more than an essential connection with form, it was this constraint—I was about to say "principle"—that characterized literature and carried its immense movement all the way to us: an obligation to tell the most common of secrets. Literature does not epitomize this

great policy, this great discursive ethic by itself; and, certainly, there is more to literature than that; but that is where it has its locus and its conditions of existence.

Whence its dual relation to truth and to power. Whereas the fabulous could function only in a suspension between true and false, literature based itself, rather, on a decision of nontruth: it explicitly presented itself as artifice while promising to produce effects of truth that were recognizable as such. The importance that was given, in the Classical period, to naturalness and imitation was doubtless one of the first ways of formulating this functioning of literature "in truth." Fiction thus replaced fable, the novel broke free of the fantastical and was able to develop only by freeing itself from it ever more completely. Hence, literature belongs to the great system of constraint by which the West obliged the quotidian to enter into discourse. But literature occupies a special place within that system: determined to seek out the quotidian beneath the quotidian itself, to cross boundaries, to ruthlessly or insidiously bring our secrets out in the open, to displace rules and codes, to compel the unmentionable to be told, it will thus tend to place itself outside the law, or at least to take on the burden of scandal, transgression, or revolt. More than any other form of language, it remains the discourse of "infamy": it has the duty of saying what is most resistant to being said—the worst, the most secret, the most insufferable, the shameless. The fascination that psychoanalysis and literature have exerted on each other for years is significant in this connection. But it should not be forgotten that this singular position of literature is only the effect of a certain system [*dispositif*] of power that traverses the economy of discourses and strategies of truth in the West.

I began by saying that these texts might be read as so many "short stories." That was saying too much, no doubt; none of them will ever measure up to the least tale by Chekhov, Maupassant, or James. Neither "quasi-" nor "subliterature," they are not even the first sketch of a genre; they are the action, in disorder, noise, and pain, of power on lives, and the discourse that comes of it. *Manon Lescaut* tells one of the stories that are presented here.[4]

NOTES

* This essay is the introduction to an anthology of the prison archives of the Hôpital général and the Bastille, part of a series that Foucault compiled and presented under the collective title *Parallel Lives* (Gallimard). The series includes the memoir of Herculine Barbin and the still untranslated *Le Désordre des familles* (*The Disorder of Families*), a volume of "poison pen letters" that Foucault compiled with the historian Arlette Farge. [eds.]

1 This is the name given to the collection of lives of saints that was compiled in the eighteenth century by the Dominican Jacques de Voragine, *La Légende dorée* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion nos. 132–133, 1967), 2 vols. [eds.]

2 Gilles de Rais was the original Blueheard (he killed six of his wives, and was discovered by his seventh); Cartouche was a famous highwayman; Sade is the Marquis de, after whom "sadism" is named; Lacenaire was a serial murderer condemned to death during Louis-Bonaparte's tenure (1840s), and also the author of a notorious memoir of his exploits. [eds.]

3 This is an allusion to remarks by the Duke de Chaulieu, reported in the *Lettre de Mademoiselle de Chaulieu à Madame de L'Estorade*, in Honoré de Balzac, *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* (Paris: Librairie nouvelle, 1856), p. 59: "En coupant la tête à Louis XVI, la Révolution a coupé la tête à tous les pères de famille." [eds.]

4 A. F. Prévost, *Les Aventures du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (Amsterdam, 1733).